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### **Geoffrey Rowell and Christine Hall (eds), The Gestures of God: Explorations in Sacramentality**

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Geoffrey Rowell and Christine Hall (eds.), *The Gestures of God. Explorations in Sacramentality* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), ISBN 0-8264-7782-8 (pbk), xix + 194 pp.

This collection is a product of the 2003 Sacrament and Sacramentality Consultation held at St George's House, Windsor, UK. Its eleven varied contributions are produced from Anglican, Orthodox, Catholic, feminist and Indian perspectives.

In the opening essay, Geoffrey Rowell considers the links between the sacramental, incarnational and material. An implicit Trinitarian formula is at work here: God creates matter, becomes embodied in matter, and continues to animate it. The destiny of humanity and universe is therefore a shared one: to find 'fulfilment in a liberation from decay and futility'. This vision requires a careful balancing of cataphatic (affirmative) with apophatic (negative) description: God dwells in the universe because God is greater than the universe, not because God exists as part of it. It points not to a general affirmation that the world is sacred, but, as Edward Pusey states, to a union of type and archetype in which the distinctiveness of each is maintained, or, in the words of Rowan Williams in the foreword, 'to the conviction that the world is full of the life of a God whose nature is known in Christ and the Spirit'.

Peter Bouteneff identifies a similar dynamic unity-in-diversity in the understanding of sacrament as *mysterion*. This classic Orthodox concept describes the union of created and uncreated, and is clearly identifiable in the New Testament. As John of Damascus affirms, matter is the medium through which salvation is accomplished, and is for this reason worthy of honour. Bouteneff draws attention to some human experiences and church practices that have been considered sacramental but were not counted among the seven sacraments defined in the West under the influence of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*: burial and monastic tonsure (Pseudo-Dionysius) and the consecration of a church (Nicholas Cabasilas). These suggest 'a healthy fluidity in the reckoning of sacraments', which are derived from 'the sacrament that is Christ himself'.

To this list, David Brown adds, following Augustine: the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the sign of the cross, ashes of penitence, oil of anointing, and the Easter liturgy. All these 'offer a foretaste or anticipation of a larger reality'. Brown, like Bouteneff, conceives of the sacramental in the context of human experience, and complains that modern theology has tended, in its anxiety to preserve divine freedom, to withdraw from the half-way meetings

which experience allows. In excluding the possibility of such meetings, however, lies the danger of denying the generosity of the divine response to searching humanity.

The time has surely arrived for many churches to rediscover the fact that their sacraments are sacramental. Even the eucharist is now so often celebrated using verbose liturgies that are filled with sometimes ponderous seasonal material and further augmented with unneeded introductions and explanations by worship leaders. David Power reminds us that conceiving of the eucharistic liturgy as poetics can be a means of widening focus from *anamnesis* and *epiclesis* onto the whole of the celebration. To take the sacramental seriously also requires us, however, to pay attention with *all* our senses to divine disclosure. Words might sometimes prevent us from doing this.

This collection provides a resource for churches wishing to reflect on how a renewed openness to the sacramental, conceived in diverse and imaginative ways and not limited to frequent traditional observances, might invigorate their own corporate life. I will never forget the occasion when I entered the building of a church renowned for its catholic piety and daily masses at the start of its annual bazaar and saw the principal altar and entire surrounding area piled high with bric-a-brac! This was an extreme instance of a church desecrating its focal sacred space, but significant because it pointed to deeper issues concerning the sacramental life of that church community at that time: an inability to let go of large quantities of old objects in order to create space for new sacramental encounters and projects; reluctance to allow the eucharist to pervade and disrupt the whole of church life, especially accumulated traditions and notions of duty; refusal of the sacraments that newcomers were offering to the church, on the grounds that these would transform longstanding practices and power relations.

The most provocative essay in the collection is provided by John Drane, who identifies a popular sacramentality in nightclub culture. Evoking the language, if not the conclusions, of Karl Rahner, he asserts: 'By offering a glimpse of the meaning and spiritual purpose that we believe ourselves increasingly unlikely to achieve in this lifetime, the sacramentality of the club also offers an eschatological dimension.' While just about able to assent to this, some readers might feel unable to go further and agree that 'the clubbing experience at its best offers most of the ingredients of church at its best'. The question I have about these proposals is whether or not they satisfy the following aspect of our understanding of the sacramental: that it sustains and transforms the people and community who receive it, and their wider community. The culture in which British clubbing takes place contains many elements in urgent need of transformation: binge drinking, hard drug consumption, violence,

sexual promiscuity, noise disturbance to neighbours, low pay for workers, reaping of financial rewards by premises owners, breakdown in intergenerational sociality, and the undermining of local democracy by central government restrictions on grounds for licence refusal. A convincing sacramentary of clubbing would need, at least in the British case, to show how such elements are being transformed.

Jyoti Sahi describes how various aspects of embodiment, including yoga, art, sound and breath, reveal that ‘the human body is a microcosm ... related to a much wider scheme of nature, which extends to the whole cosmos’. This cosmic context helps guard against a return to privatised notions of sacramentality that a focus on experience might unwittingly promote. Sahi’s reflections suggestively echo portions of Geoffrey Rowell’s essay concerned with materiality, and resonate with insights from Christian philosophical theology that could provide openings for future work. Just one example would be the ecumenical correspondence between Gottfried Leibniz (Lutheran) and Bartholomaeus Des Bosses (Jesuit) concerning the nature of eucharistic consecration, its study by Maurice Blondel (French Catholic), and consequent impact on the sacramental theologies of Henri de Lubac and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.